



RETROSPECTION ON THE STRUGGLE FOR MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION AMONG THE BODOS

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INTRODUCTION

Mother tongue as medium of instructions became a contentious issue in Assam, a multi-lingual state of India since the colonial period. The aspiration to impart education through respective mother tongue is still continuing. This desire for mother tongue education is basically to survive their language through medium of instruction in the institution. Therefore language is considered as the vehicle of thought that records human experiences and reflects the beliefs, civilization and culture of a community (Aggarwal, 1991: 18). Mother tongue education can be an effective tool to percolate knowledge on the cultural heritage of the past to generation for a particular linguistic community. Child's education in mother tongue significantly influencing learning and literacy rate. In many cases of school children of backward areas, whose mother tongue is different from classroom language; create difficulty in acquiring knowledge taught at school. Therefore mother tongue education provision is necessary for a healthy learning environment. At present Assam, no doubt it is very difficult for the state to provide mother tongue education to every ethnic community for its multi lingual characteristics. Still the marginalized linguistics groups struggle to preserved language and identity. Of many such aspirants mention can be made of Bodo community. Because they have a long aspiration to get introduced their language as medium of instruction in the institutions of Assam under the leadership of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS).

As we have discussed the demand to have education in mother tongue is a rising trend among every linguistic community in Assam. People became aware of the role of education to safeguard and develop their language. The prevailing ethnic articulation is that the medium of instruction is a media to preserve linguistic identity. As such language became a tool for identity assertion as well. In Assam the 'identity assertion of various tribes and races started with non-political issues like ethnic identity, economic, development of language and mother tongue as medium of instruction' (Phukon, 1996: 137). The Bodos identity movement began with the demand to introduce the Bodo language as a medium of instruction. In the case of Bodo language movement, the fear of Assamese language domination and the decline of its language speakers was the notion of demand for linguistic identity. To begin their movement the Bodos try to preserved their language by demanding Institutional recognition and development of literature. The idea of preserving the identity of the Bodo and development of mother tongue can be traced to the colonial period. The Habraghat Bodo Sanmilani (HBS) was

formed in 1912. It played a pivotal role in the preservation and development of the Bodo language until the formation of BSS on November 16, 1952. The BSS perceived language as powerful tools to fulfil the aspiration of the separate identity of the Bodos.

The Bodo language belongs to sub-section of Bodo-Naga under the Assam-Burmese group of the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Tibeto-Chinese or Sino-Tibetan family. It is very rich in vocabulary and is noted for its phonological peculiarity (Brahma, 1960: 8) and shares some common features in respect of vocabulary, phonology, morphology, and syntax with Bodo groups (Boro, 2012: 11). The Bodo linguistic group includes Dimasa, Rabha, Garo, Kok-Borok, Koch, Bodo, Barman, Hajong and Lalung Kachari. The BSS motivated by the articulation of the Bodo linguistic group since the colonial period. This sense of linguistic priority among the Bodos against the Assamese language domination spearheaded the language movement. Therefore, the present study finds that the movement for the introduction of Bodo-medium in schools was the manifestation of the Bodo's strong attachment to their mother language.

Bodo Language Unrest

To talk about the demand of Bodo medium education in Assam, we have to delve into the Bodo identity resistance movement of the second decade of the 20th century. In the initial stage the educated Bodos published journals and launched social reformation programmes. Kalicharan Brahma submitted memorandum to the Simon Commission in Shillong on January 4, 1929 for reservation of electoral seat for the 'tribals'. It played an important role in tribal identity politics in Assam. Formation of Tribal League in 1933 was served as platform for political self-determination among the Bodo groups that concern identity and political share in Assam. Identity politics in Assam got momentum due to the domination of the advanced section of the Assamese people (Phukon, 1996: 139). The dominant position of Assamese language was perceived as a threat to the underdeveloped language like Bodo. In the words of E.A Gait 'The Bodo dialects, though still spoken in Assam by more than half a million persons are in their turn giving way to the Aryan languages and their complete disappearance is only a matter of time' (Gait, 2015: 6). That time the gradual process of converting to Sarania from the Boro culture largely contributed to the declination of the Bodo language (Goswami, 2000: 42). The geographical migration of more dominant linguistic group also contributed for the declining position of Bodo language. George Abraham Grierson accepted that 'the migration of the

Aryan speakers in Cachar, Sylhet and Dacca was an invasion on the Bodo culture that succumbs to the separation of the Bodo linguistically'. According to him, at this situation 'the Bodo language was gradually dying out' (Grierson, 2005: 62). A large number of educated Bodos became bilingual. This is because they spoke mother tongue at home and the Assamese as the language for culture and education in the absence of Bodo Medium in the schools and institutions. Under the influence of the Assamese, the Bodo were psychologically prepared to adopt the Assamese language as their mother tongue (Choudhury, 2007: 90). Under this phenomenon, many Bodos were unable to speak their mother tongue until the present decade correctly.

Therefore, from twenty century, the Bodo Sahitya Sabha leadership started to assert a distinct identity. As mentioned above, they were motivated to have a separated identity from the Assamese identity. To this end, they have taken up a language issue. Sanjib Baruah has rightly pointed out when he says, 'one of the most imperative battlegrounds of Bodo cultural politics is language' (Baruah, 1999: 185). Ultimately, the BSS articulated that language and literature are keys to existence, survival and identity of the Bodo community. Hence language issue had motivated the Bodo agitation for identity at different time and space. The demand for the Bodo language as a medium of instruction in the institution of Assam was the culmination of identity consciousness.

Early Phase of Bodo language

The Bodo language was completely in oral form until the colonial era. We could not found any single work on the Bodo language before the colonial period. A written tradition was absent among them. E.A. Gait who contributed few works on Assam history observed that "the science of history was unknown to the early inhabitants of Assam" (Gait, 2015: 1). Suniti Kumar Chatterji in 1954 said that 'the Bodo literature like songs and fairy tales and traditional myths and legends were all in oral' (Chatterji, 1991: 41). Thereby the Bodo language got attention of the Colonial administrators. For the first time the Colonial Officer or Administrator, Philanthropists and Christian Missionaries put the Bodo language in written tradition. In 1839 A. Campbell wrote 'Note on the Mechis, together with a Small Vocabulary of the Language' that studied the Mech people. Then B.H. Hodson published the "Essay the First; On the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimel Tribes" in 1847. Hence, these work first time introduce literary activities among the non-literate Bodo people. The introduction of writing in the Bodo language was the foundation of the Bodo language identity in the literary world. It was the colonial period that provided an impetus to construct and understand the history of the Bodo community.

Subsequently, the literate Bodos of the then Goalpara district started writing in Bodo language. They codified their customary laws in the form of social rules and the code was named as "Boroni Phisa O Ayen" (Bodo Fellows and their laws) in 1915. This published work supplies valuable information on customary law and other relevant data of the Bodo society. Afterwards, the initiative to write Bodo language started among the Bodos of north-bank of the river Brahmaputra. Mention can

be made of Khonthai Methai written by Rupnath Brahma and Modaram Brahma published in 1923. This publication prepared an environment for the growth and development of Bodo literature. The first Bodo magazine "Bibar" (Flower) edited by Satish Chandra Basumatary came out in 1920 and from 1924 it was published quarterly in tri-lingual i.e. Bodo, Assamese and Bengali. In 1924 Promod Chandra Brahma edited and published Hathorki-Hala. He also edited another magazine, Sanshri Arw Mushri (Magazine in Boro, Assamese and Bangla language) in 1937, Olongbar magazine in 1938 and Hathorki Hala in 1942.

Based on the available Bodo language and literature during the colonial period, the Bodo medium was for the first time introduced in school education by the Christian missionaries. Bodo language was for the first time introduced as a medium of instructions in the schools during the colonial period. The American Baptist Mission had establishment school for the Kachari children and introduced Bodo medium text in the school (Bhandary, 1950: 13). The first missionary to begin this venture was Sidney Endle who headed the Kachari Mission in the Darrang district. He founded the first-ever Bodo medium L.P. school at Bengbari in 1865. Rev. O.L. Skrefsrud works like the "Boroni Foraigra Bijab", "Boroni Foraijennai Bijab", "Gothoni Lekha", and "Lutherni Undwi Foraigra Bijab" in Bodo language largely help the Bodo pupils from the year 1888 (Basumatary, 2010: 4). Rev. Bechtold also published "Baibelni Makase Gaham Kourang" in 1905 and involved in teaching Bodo children. A. Christiansen, a Danish missionary, published "Forai Jennai Bijab" and "Boroni Sannai Bijab" in 1930 (Brahma, 2007: 54). In this way, the missionaries taught the Bodo children in mother tongue from 1865 to 1940.

However, the Bodo medium was not introduced in the Government schools. The mass Bodo children continued to receive education in Bengali and Assamese medium schools. Despite the opening Missionaries Schools, the education scenario among the Bodo remains dismal. Only a few well-to-do families and people around Mission Schools were able to access education. The general masses remained illiterate. B.K. Bhandary who had worked among the Kachari found that most of the children drop off in the very first two years of primary education while education among girls was almost non-existent (Bhandary, 1950: 13).

Bodo Medium Education Demand

The Tribal League submitted a memorandum to Jawaharlal Nehru on March 20, 1947 demand ensuring adequate provisions for mother tongue as medium of instruction (Brahma, 2015: 68). The Bodo leaders perceived a threat to the existence of their language without a medium of instruction in the institution. On September 26, 1952, the then Boro Literary Club decided to move the government for making the Bodo language a medium of instruction. But their demand was not heard by the then Assam government. Thereafter the Bodo medium issue was taken up by the BSS and the idea got momentum. The BSS in its delegate house unanimously passed the resolution to introduce the Bodo medium education (Basumatary, 2008: 59-60). Moving towards the agenda, an expert committee on Bodo language and literature consisting of five members to

bring out a standardized Bodo language and to prepare Bodo Grammar and Dictionary was formed. As a first initiative they met Chief Minister (CM) Bishnuram Medhi and Bimala Prasad Chaliha the then president of APCC on December 26, 1952, in Dhubri (Basumatary, 2008: 64) and submitted its first-ever memorandum demanding introduction of the Bodo language in the primary schools of the Bodo dominated Assam. In this memorandum the BSS put forward the justification for the introduction of Bodo Medium education and its feasibility. They argued that the Bodo students from remote villages found it difficult to understand the teaching in Assamese or Bengali. The committee place the communication problem between the Bodo students and the Assamese or Bengali teachers.

At first, the Assam government refused to concede the BSS demand for the Bodo mother tongue for instruction in the School. The BSS however constantly insisted for its introduction. To this end, they again submitted a memorandum to the CM of Assam asking for the introduction of Bodo medium education for Bodo students of classes A and B in primary schools on December 26, 1952. By then the Assam government proposed to incorporate Bodo words and vocabularies side by side with the Assamese instead of the introduction of the Bodo medium. No doubt the BSS did not opposed the idea but they alleged that the books published by the Assam government in Bodo language contained a large number of Assamese words and errors (Swargiary, 1997: 84-85). Thereafter, the BSS put more pressure on the Government to expedite the introduction of Bodo medium. Further, they themselves prepared the Bodo Primer, word books, dictionary and a detailed scheme indicating the areas where a Bodo medium could be introduced.

Meanwhile in 1960, the Assam government passed the Assam Official Language Act and Assamese became the official language of the state. The Official Language Act was opposed by the non-Assamese speaking people. The Bodos joined hands with the non-Assamese speaking people in the protest against the official language Act. The reason behind the protest by the BSS was apprehensive that the making of Assamese as the sole official language of Assam would be a stumbling block toward the introduction of the Bodo medium in school education (Choudhury, 2007: 97-98). Attitude of the Assam government was perceived as the step-motherly treatment by the Bodo leadership. By 13-14 November 1960, the BSS stage a public demonstration. The BSS once again submitted a memorandum to the Assam government along with details on the scheme for the introduction of the Bodo language in 1961. By November 16, 1962, again organized a mass rally to bring the attention of the Prime Minister of India (Mondal, 2011: 124). Nearly twenty-five thousand Bodos were reported joining the rally to draw the attention of both the central and the state government. Afterwards the government constituted 'One Man Committee' under the leadership of the Forest Minister, Rupnath Brahma (Swargiary, 1997: 85). The one-man committee submitted its report in favour of the BSS and recommended for the introduction of Bodo Medium at the primary level in February 1963 (Mwshahary, 2010: 17). Based on the recommendation of the Committee, the Chief Minister, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, had officially announced the government's decision to introduce

Bodo language as the medium of instruction in primary schools of Assam. The formal inauguration of the Bodo medium at the primary level of education was took place in Kokrajhar Sub-Division at Kokrajhar Higher Secondary School field on May 18, 1963. To mark the inauguration of the Bodo medium in the Kokrajhar sub-division the welcome address was written in the Bodo language (Basumatary, 2013: 103). Subsequently, the Bodo language was introduced as a medium of instruction in phase-wise. In 1963, the Bodo medium was introduced at Kokrajhar Anchalik Panchayat and Dotma Anchalik Panchayat under Kokrajhar district and in 1964 the Sidli and Gossaigaon Anchalik Panchayat areas of Kokrajhar district. For the third phase, the Bodo medium was extended to Boro Bazar Anchalik of Kokrajhar district in 1965.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the Bodo language as a medium of instruction in the institutions of Assam was introduced after a series of protest and rally spearheaded by the BSS. It was the result of the long-cherished dream of the Bodos. Hope and aspiration of the first generation of Bodo leadership came into true. The Bodo leadership under the banner of BSS have received mass support of the Bodo people who had come forward in the protest and rallies. With the introduction of Bodo language as a medium of instructions in the Bodo dominated area of Assam provides the Bodo children with an opportunity to pursue formal education in their own mother tongue. This also facilitated the institutionalization and consolidation of Bodo language and literature in the long run. It laid the foundation for the development and growth of the Bodo language. Later it became a kind of impetus in the inclusion of the Bodo language in the 8th Schedule of Indian Constitution in 2003. It can be called as the highest achievement of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha. But this achievement does not mean the solution of all problem of the Bodo language and medium of instruction. Because till today the BSS face many challenges such as shortage of teacher, textbooks, infrastructure, the decline of students' enrollment especially in the government schools.

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